

Moose Creek Cabin Replacement

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

For
Bureau of Land Management
Eastern Interior Field Office
1150 University Avenue
Fairbanks, AK 99709

FF086041

DOI-BLM-AK-F020-2013-0019-EA

Located in:

Eastern Interior Field Office
White Mountains National Recreation Area

Prepared by:

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Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose of the proposed action is to allow the BLM to provide an adequate and safe public use cabin for the White Mountains National Recreation Area cabins and trails system.

The need for the action is established by the Record of Decision (ROD) for the White Mountains National Recreation Area Resource Management Plan (WMRMP), 1986 and by the Recreation Activity Management Plan (RAMP), 1988. The WMRMP states that “trails and recreational development will be located to avoid conflicts...development would include a system of trails, developed trailheads with facilities and a system of appropriately located public use cabins.” The RAMP specifies that cabins will be located on sites suitable for supporting a cabin at 6 to 10 miles apart for use by skiers.

The existing Moose Creek Cabin is degenerating beyond a usable standard and the maintenance attempts to repair it have been either too costly or ineffective. The cabin was constructed on ice rich/active soils in 1987. Since then the annual freeze thaw cycle has taken a toll on the structures. The recommendation from staff is to remove the cabin and outhouse, and remediate the site. Then construct a new cabin and outhouse on well drained soils where ice is absent and the stability and structural integrity of the cabin and outhouse can be maintained.

Two alternative sites were identified as meeting the approximate ten mile location between cabins along the Trail Creek Trail, as well as potentially possessing well drained ice free soils. Test pits at both sites revealed that one site had ice rich soils and the other had well drained sandy schist soils. Therefore only the site where the well-drained sand and schist soils were present will be analyzed in this document.

Laws, Regulations, other EAs that influence this EA

White Mountains National Recreation Area Record of Decision, Recreation Area Management Plan, 1988. Federal Land Policy and Management Act, 1976. Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, 1980.

Decision to be Made

The BLM will make a decision whether or not to replace the Moose Creek Cabin with a new cabin on more suitable soils to support the structure and its associated uses. The new cabin site is within a mile of the existing cabin.

Scoping and Issues

Internal scoping involved the Eastern Interior Field Office Interdisciplinary Team (IDT). No issues were identified by the IDT.

External scoping was conducted by posting the EA on the BLM National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Register which is an online resource. No comments were received from the public. The proposed action is considered not controversial.

Location, Land Status and Conformance with Land Use Plans

Location: The proposed action is located approximately thirty miles North of Fairbanks, Alaska. The specific lands affected are within section 29 of Township 5N., Range 1E., Fairbanks Meridian. The latitude and longitude of the proposed cabin site is 65.226415° by -147.604670°.

Land Status: The subject lands are entirely located within the White Mountains National Recreation Area, managed by the BLM.

Conformance with Land Use Plans: The proposed action is located within an area covered by the ROD White Mountains NRA of 1986 and is consistent with Goal 1: Provide for a variety of public outdoor recreational opportunities which emphasize the existing natural-primitive and semi-primitive values appropriate to the WMNRA designation.

Proposed Action and Alternatives

Proposed Action:

The proposed action is to allow the BLM to construct a public use cabin along the Trail Creek Trail, near the Moose Creek Cabin, on well drained ice free soils. The proposed location is approximately three quarters of a mile east of the existing cabin and situated halfway between Lee's and Crowberry cabins. The proposed cabin site has a south-west aspect, and on schist type, well drained soils generally free of permafrost. Vegetation includes recently burnt black spruce/white spruce stand.

The BLM proposes to build a sixteen foot by sixteen foot log cabin, a wood shed, and an outhouse. The cabin would be capable of sleeping six people. The outhouse will be a pit privy type. The building materials, tools and personnel would be flown in to the site by helicopter. Additionally, four-wheelers will be brought in over the Haystack Trail to assist in moving materials and possibly shuttling some items from the current cabin site.

A trail would need to be constructed to the cabin from the Trail Creek Trail. The proposed trail would be approximately 200 yards in length by 8 feet wide (0.11 acres of disturbance), and constructed to sustainable trail standards. The soils in the area near the cabin are suitable for constructing a trail for use by four-wheelers. The BLM reserves the option to bring in heavy equipment for constructing the access trail to the new cabin, although the plan is to build it with hand tools.

Upon completion, the cabin would be opened to the public and replace the niche fulfilled by the current Moose Creek Cabin.

The old Moose Creek Cabin will be partially dismantled; windows and door removed, and then turned over to the Alaska Fire Service for demolition. Any remaining items left at the site will be removed over land in the winter by snowmobile.

All tools and equipment brought to the construction site would be cleaned to reduce the risk of transporting invasive weeds.

The construction plan would provide for crew members to camp at the cabin building project site in tents and a cook tent will also be set up.

Alternative B:

Remove the existing structures (the current Moose Creek Cabin) without constructing a new replacement cabin in the general vicinity. This alternative is not a reasonable option because it does not fulfill our purpose and need and would leave a nineteen mile gap between cabins which would be well outside the recommended distance of six to ten miles set forth in the RAMP for non-motorized users. This alternative will not be analyzed further.

No Action Alternative:

The no action alternative would result in not allowing the new cabin and associated facilities to be constructed. This alternative is not a viable option since the cabin is deteriorating beyond a usable condition. Staff constructed a temporary outhouse and stabilized the cabin last year, but those were intended as temporary. The cabin will be closed to public use. This would leave a nineteen mile gap between cabins which would be well outside the recommended distance of six to ten miles set forth in the RAMP for non-motorized users.

Affected Environment:

Located approximately forty miles north of Fairbanks, Alaska, the White Mountains NRA encompasses approximately one-million acres and is bordered on the south by the Fairbanks North Star Borough, the west by State of Alaska lands, the north by the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge, and to the east by the Steese National Conservation Area.

Recreation

The White Mountains NRA is recognized for both its recreational opportunities and its extraordinary natural beauty and landscapes. As the popularity of this area has grown, visitation and demand for a variety of recreational opportunities has increased as well. Examples of activities commonly conducted in the area include boating and river-based recreation, camping, hiking, sightseeing and photography, horseback riding, hunting, dog mushing, skiing, ski-joring, and OHV use (including snowmobiles). Visitation and the activities performed in the White Mountains NRA often vary with the weather. During the milder winter temperatures, visitors may enjoy traveling using the network of winter trails and cabins, while during the summer season, visitors may enjoy dispersed camping associated with motorized access. The winter cabin and trails program has become hugely popular with local residents as well as out of state and international visitors. Often times during high use periods such as; holidays and spring break, visitors desiring an overnight stay at one of the public use cabins are turned away because all the cabins are reserved.

The existing cabin was constructed in 1987 at the edge of a tussock meadow surrounded by Black Spruce trees. The cabin has averaged 547 visitor use days per year over the past 7 years. The majority of the use is occurring during the winter months when access is much easier with groomed snow trails. The majority of use occurring in the summer is during moose hunting season, two weeks in September. The cleared footprint around the cabin, where the majority of use occurs is approximately .23 acres. The footprint includes the cabin and associated facilities including an outhouse and woodshed.

The proposed cabin location is surrounded by White Spruce, Black Spruce and Birch trees of which many have burned from wildfire during 2005. The trees to the south and west of the proposed cabin site were unaffected by the wildfire.

Environmental Effects:

The proposed action allows for continued safe use of the southern portion of the WMNRA cabin and trails program for winter activities including; snowmobiling, dog mushing and skiing, and for some summer activities including; riding OHV's, hunting, and to a lesser extent, hiking. Access to this area provides an opportunity for escaping personal social pressures, escaping crowds, and enjoying scenery and natural landscapes. It also provides the opportunity to test skills and abilities and learn capabilities while experiencing the sight, sound, and smells of nature in a natural landscape and being close to nature during the winter.

Though the cabin will be slightly larger (256 sq.ft. vs. 192 sq.ft.), the footprint and use patterns are expected to be nearly the same. The existing cabin was wet and muddy around the perimeter because of the poor soil conditions. The proposed cabin site should have fewer impacts to soils because of more suitable conditions, more drainable soils, and less to no permafrost.

It is expected the use numbers will be similar to slightly increasing with the construction of the new cabin in a new location. The increase will be due to a slight trending increase in use of the White Mountains NRA as a whole; due to a larger cabin design that will accommodate more people and that the cabin will be constructed in a more desirable location.

Indirect impacts:

Indirect impacts would occur by allowing access to users that might not otherwise travel out into the NRA in the winter because of the large distances and the severe cold. The cabin provides a destination and safe shelter during harsh weather often encountered in this climate. Use allows for the escape of everyday responsibilities in a semi-primitive, natural setting, and being away from crowds of people in an open space area.

Cumulative impacts:

There are 12 other public use cabins in the White Mountains NRA where individuals can rent for a nominal fee; currently \$25/night. There are also 2 trail shelters that are free of charge and first come, first served. There are 2 basic types of uses occurring at the cabins; those that are accessible by ATV's in the summer and those that are not. The cabins that are not accessible to ATV's in the summer receive very little use. Of the cabins that are accessible to ATV's in the summer the use numbers decrease the further one gets away from the road system. The distance to the proposed location puts it in the category of being further away from the road system for summer use.

The average user rate for all the cabins combined during the 2013 calendar year was 498 visitor use days. The Moose Creek Cabin had 527 visitor use days in 2013, putting it above the average and 4th most popular cabin of the 12. However, as stated earlier, most of the use is occurring in the winter months when snow covers the ground.

Cumulative impacts would include localized clearing of trees for firewood though this use is occurring nearby at present anyways. The area was burned by wildfire in 2005, so there is a lot of standing dead trees. Having a new cabin in a drier and more user-friendly location may draw increased use by the public. Use has lessened at the old cabin site due to its declining condition, so the use will likely increase once a new cabin is constructed. The majority of use will occur in the winter months. Encounters with other users would be limited to a large degree by the capacity of the cabin. Trampling of soils and vegetation should be similar or somewhat less than the old site due to the better soil conditions more suitable for such uses.

Residual impacts would include diminished primitive values in areas immediately surrounding recreation cabin. Wildlife will tend to move away from the area around the cabin when use is high, but these uses are occurring at the current site a short ways down the hill, so effects will be similar. 200 yards of trail will be constructed to the cabin site, but the trail will follow the contour of the hillside and should hardly be visible from a distance. An outhouse will be constructed near the cabin.

The No Action Alternative would not permit the construction of a new cabin and would indirectly limit access to the WMNRA by creating a large gap between public use cabins. This would result in a distance too great for some users to travel. There would also be one less cabin in the WMNRA cabin and trails system that is already at capacity during high use periods.

Tribes, Individuals or Agencies Consulted

| Name | Title |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|
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List of Preparers and Reviewers

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| Jim Herriges | Wildlife Biologist | ACECs, Invasive, Nonnative Species, Subsistence, Threatened or Endangered Species, Vegetation, Wildlife/Terrestrial |
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Standard Operating Procedures for Construction Projects on BLM Managed Lands

The project lead will distribute the following information along with “Leave No Trace” information to the construction crew prior to trip departure. The information shall include:

- All participants would stay on developed trails where they exist and use dispersed traveling techniques as described in “Leave No Trace” guidance in undeveloped areas.
- All equipment, including four-wheelers, tools, boot soles, and tents should be cleaned and materials inspected to assure that they are free of non-native seeds and plant parts before beginning the project.
- All trash will be hauled back to Fairbanks after the completion of the project and disposed of properly in a landfill.
- A pit privy will be constructed as part of the project, so an outhouse will be used by the construction crew.
- Approved containers would be used for fueling equipment as well as containment devices to minimize the risk of fuel spills.
- Respect wildlife. Do not feed animals and avoid disturbing them from natural activities. The construction crew will try to keep the camp as clean as possible so not to attract bears or other wildlife.